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Housekeepers' Chat

Friday, February 23, 1929.

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

Subject: "Training the Appetite of the New Generation". Approved by Bureau of Home Economics, U. S. D. A.

Bulletin available: "Food for Young Children."

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Among my letters last week was one from the mother of three young children.

"Dear Aunt Sammy," she writes. "I am particularly interested in talks on food for children. I want my youngsters to have the foods which will make them strong and healthy. But it isn't enough to tell us what foods children should eat. I know that Tommy and Mary Ellen need milk and eggs. Tommy and Mary Ellen know it, too. However, on the rare occasions when Tommy does eat an egg, it is with the air of conferring a great favor on his parents. Eight-year-old Mary Ellen informed us the other day that she has a complex against milk. The youngest child is also finicky, and sometimes I am at my wits' end, to make them eat. Abe Martin knew what he was talking about, when he said, 'There's few careers as thrillin' as bein' a mother.' If you can offer any suggestions on how to make children like the foods that are good for them, I'll be very grateful; I admit I'm pessimistic about the situation in my home."

I took this letter to Rowena Schmidt, a friend of mine in the Bureau of Home Economics, whose special hobby is finding out why the younger generation refuses to eat what's good for it.

"Miss Schmidt," I said, "have you discovered a method of making little children like spinach and carrots, and milk and eggs, and all the other foods they ought to eat? How do you manage all the youngsters at the nursery school, during meal time?"

You see Miss Schmidt has a special interest in the nursery school at the Child Research Center in Washington, and I knew she had been planning lunches for children.

"Aunt Sammy," said Miss Schmidt, "it isn't a difficult matter to train little children to like a variety of foods. Liking is really only a matter of learning to like; we learn easiest when we are young. Our tastes are the result of experience and habit. That's why you and I, as Americans, like ham and eggs better than chop suey. Our American likes have been built up from infancy. I wish these women whose children are such problems could go with me to the nursery school some time at noon, and see the children eat. I wish -- "

"Miss Schmidt," I interrupted. "They can't go with you, but won't you tell them about it? You write a talk, about the nursery school, and I'll broadcast it for you. Is that a bargain?"

Miss Schmidt agreed that it was a bargain -- for me. And she wrote us a very good talk, on "Training the Appetite of the New Generation." I shall read it to you, just as she wrote it:

TRAINING THE APPETITE OF THE NEW GENERATION

I wish that you could visit the nursery school with me some time at noon, and watch about a dozen and a half little tots enjoying their dinner. These tiny American-citizens-in-the-making range in age from two years to 3-1/2 years. Most of them have learned at home to like a variety of vegetables and fruits. But some of the children who come to the nursery school have been spoiled at home and have built up food prejudices. It is interesting to see how under nursery school conditions their appetites are re-trained or are kept in trim as is necessary.

In the first place, there is so much active play in the fresh air, either in the play yard or on a sheltered porch that appetite is stimulated by empty stomachs. Any child who does not realize that he is hungry is likely to find it out when he sees others eager to eat. This is the influence of good example at work. Children are great imitators, and usually like best to do what others are doing.

Good appetities and the influence of imitation are not the only reasons that the children at the nursery school are interested in eating. A very important reason is that interest is created through self help and independence. It is fun and a real privilege to help set the little low tables, placing on them gay green oil cloth doilies, small sized silver, and bright little pitchers for the milk. And to serve the table is a real treat! Can you picture a sturdy boy or girl, just a little past his second birthday, steadily trudging across the room carrying a tray with a bowl of soup, or a luncheon sized plate of dinner? That happens every day at the nursery school, and with very few accidents because the trays are light and small, the table from which the tray and food are lifted is low, and the table to which they are carried is low. Serving is a valuable experience not only to develop control of young arms and legs but because small Arch or Patricia, thrilled over the chance to serve forgets if his most favored food is not on the plate today and sits down to enjoy dinner with the rest of the children.

We adults must remember that eating is less of a chore for little folks when the fork is not too big, and when there is a small pitcher from which to pour one's own milk into a small glass that can be grasped easily and firmly by a tiny hand. Have you ever stopped to think what an artificial, out-of-size world we place little children in, expecting them to adjust to it? When children fail to adjust readily at the mealhour, we are tempted to feed them, to coax, urge and perhaps punish, instead of providing equipment that fits and makes doing for oneself not only easy but fun.

But there is much else to carry away from a visit to the nursery school at noon besides the idea of suitable equipment and self help. No adult listening in on the conversation can help but be impressed by the lack of DON'TS, and by the few reminders to eat, or attempts to prod the children to eat. In fact, the teachers, one of whom sits at each little table with a group of three children,

appears to pay very little attention to the amount the children eat. She adopts a casual attitude, and under no circumstances seems anxious that they eat. If she paid too much attention to a child who happened to be slow or to refuse, he would soon learn to feel important over his misdemeanor. A word of praise: "That's fine, Jimmie. You got through on time today" is much more effective than scolding and prodding when Jimmie is slow.

Some children are habitually slow eaters; some form the habit of dreaming at the table. Such children will be benefitted by setting a time limit for finishing the meal. There must be no nagging. When the time is up, the plate is removed without scolding, but with a simple explanation: "You didn't get through, Mary. Tomorrow you will try to hurry a little faster so your plate will be empty when the time is up, and then it will not be too late for dessert." In this way Mary understands the consequences of her slow eating, and learns to speed up during the first part of the meal.

And so appetites are trained at the nursery school. Let me remind you again just how:

The children play in the fresh air to stimulate their appetites.

At mealtime the children imitate a good example set by those who are most eager to eat.

They have equipment suitable for little children to use in eating, and a chance to help get ready to eat, and to feed themselves.

They take eating as a matter of course because they are not encouraged to feel that it is a matter of special concern whether they eat or not.

They learn by experience that mealtime ends by and by, and that anyone who is not through when most everyone else is through, is too late to finish or to have dessert.

Such methods are not peculiar to nursery school conditions in Washington. Appetites and little children are much the same the world over. I described a meal hour at the nursery school so that if any of you responsible for training the appetite of very little children at home want to do so, you can use the very same methods.

This concludes Miss Schmidt's talk, on "Training the Appetite of the Younger Generation." Perhaps we can persuade her to give us another talk some time.

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